

Review: Imaginary Enemies, Real Terror

Author(s): Sidney Hook

Review by: Sidney Hook

Source: *The American Scholar*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (Summer 1978), pp. 406, 48, 410-412

Published by: [Phi Beta Kappa Society](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41210444>

Accessed: 16-12-2015 06:37 UTC

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



*Phi Beta Kappa Society* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The American Scholar*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

that straight little story "Signs and Symbols" (or maybe *Pale Fire*). And Borges, the grandfather of much of the best anti-fiction, connects, and always did connect, the reader with a mind that is humane, gentle, good, steeped in tradition, worthy of great love. Only the supreme nihilists Genet and Beckett remain intransigent, refusing to compromise with what Genet calls "your world"; in the sixties both of them renounced writing. With those renunciations, along with the end or near end of the careers of Borges and Nabokov and the celebrated boom in Latin-American fiction during that decade, literary modernism, of which anti-fiction is the most important part, may be said to have ended as a movement. Literary history will come up with plenty of reasons why this happened when and as it did. What matters to writers in the late seventies, and what should matter to readers, is that those who were adversaries can, if they wish, be friends or at least colleagues.

Within the last couple of years, Stanley Elkin has published his best novel, *The Franchiser*; it is funny, extravagant, and morally serious, but there is no point in categorizing it. John Gardner has published his best fiction too, *October Light*, a fine straight novel into which he inserts a punk anti-novel (now why did he do that?). John Cheever's *Falconer* is his strongest book and a defier of labels. Is it fabulous, or allegorical, or anti, or what? Who cares? That's the good thing: how to label this wonderful story other than as fiction is not worth fussing over any longer. Ursula Le Guin emerged from what she herself (in *Antaeus* for Spring/Summer 1977) calls "the science fiction ghetto" and published *Orsinian Tales*, short stories as imaginative and serious as Cheever's—at once timely and timeless, rich, intelligent, peopled. Raymond Carver's *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* contains a score of fine stories equally pro and anti. Andrew Fetler's *To Byzantium*, Wright Morris's *Real Losses, Imaginary Gains*, and Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* are straight, while William S. Wilson's *Why I Don't Write like Franz Kafka* is anti. So?

This list is intended to be less hierarchical than illustrative, and I conclude with Wallace Stegner not just because his last two novels are excellent but also because his own fictional career illustrates my thesis. Until *Angle*

of *Repose* and *The Spectator Bird*, his fiction had been straight. Now, himself in his sixties, he narrates each of these novels in the person of a *senex iratus* who is largely adverse to the world he is part of and who avails himself of some of adversary fiction's artifices. Stegner has not abandoned realism; he has added to it, complicated it, fantasticated it. Karen Blixen appears briefly as a character in *The Spectator Bird*, and the novel incorporates into itself a tale worthy of that old sorceress who was also Isak Dinesen. Perhaps the crown to all this is that Stegner, by sophisticating his technique, has found a way to integrate his fine intelligence into his fiction far more than before, both overtly as wisdom and also structurally. In *Angle of Repose*, the narrator says of Victorians, "They could tell a good woman from a bad one, which is more than I can do any more." As a rough rule of thumb, the less solid the structure of morals and manners of the society being represented in a realistic fiction, the more intricate that fiction's own structure had better be.

Literary modernism has not died, it was not excommunicated, it is not being superseded. It is being absorbed into the great tradition, to the general benefit and especially to the benefit of realistic fiction, which had been getting somewhat etiolated. At least that is the state of things as seen from provinces which the zeitgeist does not tyrannize over.

## Imaginary Enemies, Real Terror

DELMORE SCHWARTZ: THE LIFE OF AN AMERICAN POET. By James Atlas. Farrar, Straus, Giroux. \$15.

Reviewed by SIDNEY HOOK

No one will be able to put down James Atlas's critical yet sympathetic biography of Delmore Schwartz without deep sadness. The sadness flows from a growing sense of fatality as the pattern of Schwartz's life develops in these fascinating pages. One experiences a

• SIDNEY HOOK, emeritus professor of philosophy at New York University, is senior research fellow at the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace at Stanford. Among his recent books are *Pragmatism and the Tragic Sense of Life* and *Revolution, Reform and Social Justice*.

recurrent feeling that his tragic and tortured career need not have taken the turns it did had someone or something intervened to help or advise. Yet in the light of Atlas's masterly compilation of the evidence of the wide support and sympathy, indeed the active help, Schwartz received from friends and admirers, it is difficult to believe that the ultimate outcome, in its essentials, could have been different.

Delmore Schwartz was a student of mine at New York University before he won fame as a poet and critic. Although he majored in philosophy, his passionate interest in literature was apparent in his extracurricular activities. Together with Sigmund Koch, he edited a student literary magazine of considerable sophistication. At that time he was part of the circle whose twin stars were the gifted Koch sisters, Adrienne and Vivienne, but it soon became apparent that he did not share their popularity. There was an undisguised elitism about Delmore that some of his fellow students interpreted as snobbism. He tended to denigrate American culture and literature at the same time that he glorified European life and letters.

Of considerable surprise to me was the discovery of a strong hostility toward Delmore from some of his classmates in philosophy courses. This seemed to reflect relationships that had developed outside the classroom of which I was unaware and whose causes I never understood. Delmore participated in classroom discussions, but I noticed that his interventions, which I always encouraged, were almost invariably greeted with criticism and sometimes derision by some of his fellow students who mistook his intellectual independence for captiousness. In Delmore's time, most of the students who specialized in philosophy were either Marxists, varying from the Social Democratic to the dogmatic Trotskyist persuasion, or logical positivists. Delmore was neither. He seemed to have read some neo-Thomist essays that profoundly affected him. At any rate he was committed to the Aristotelian essence doctrine. In one stormy class session he resolutely refused to accept the paradoxical analysis which asserted that the egg was potentially just as much an egg sandwich as it was a chicken. I no longer recall the theme of the discussion that suddenly led to an exchange of blows

between Delmore and one of the more cantankerous of his detractors. I had to seat them apart in future sessions, as if they were second-graders in elementary school. I never believed that the medieval students of philosophy who fought with drawn swords over the question of the objectivity of universals were animated purely by zeal for clarity and truth. In the twentieth-century philosophy classroom it was obvious that fisticuffs over essences or problems of verification had their source in the personalities of the students rather than in their ideas.

I got to know Delmore best, not in the classroom or during office hours, to which he never came, but in walks to the subway or to restaurants or publishers' offices. He would wait for me to emerge from the north exit of the Main Building at Washington Square three or four days each week. Sometimes I would prolong my walk with him if my appointment was not urgent and our conversation interesting. We talked of various things, and although at the time I was unaware of his poetic gifts, I was impressed by his sensitivity and the catholicity of his interests. What I remember most vividly was his deep concern with the Aquinate proofs of the existence of God. I vaguely recall his mention of Jacques Maritain. Again and again he would return to this theme. Whether he was only teasing or in earnest I cannot now say, but he did indicate that he was very much attracted to the Roman Catholic Church. I was rather alarmed to hear this. It was a time when quite a number of bright young students at the University of Chicago and elsewhere had become converts. I cautioned Delmore to reflect carefully before he took the plunge. On a subsequent occasion, after I had voiced my concern, I was immensely relieved when he suddenly turned to me and said, "Don't worry, Professor Hook. My father isn't in real estate for nothing!" This was his way of telling me that he was not a naïf prepared to act on the ideas he was entertaining either for the love of it or to discomfit those he did not like.

Delmore kept in touch with me episodically after he left New York University. Fame came to him early, and in the light of his subsequent development it is obvious that it went to his head. I was rather put off by his treatment of Gertrude, his first wife, who was also a student at NYU, an intelligent and

likable person who could have been a steady-influence on him. He dropped her as well as the Kochs when his star rose in the literary firmament. I met him several times at the homes of editors of the *Partisan Review*. He fancied himself as not only a poet but a man of the world and a realistic political analyst, in which latter roles he was quite unconvincing. I was shocked by his rude and cruel treatment of Elizabeth, his second wife, who seemed so vulnerable in her early infatuation with him. When I once gently expressed my puzzlement at his behavior, he burst out in a furious denunciation of her infidelities, which were clearly imaginary. From what I was told about him it seemed that his conduct was becoming more and more arbitrary. He began to drink, and he once called on me when he was in a state of glassy-eyed inebriation. It seemed to me that he enjoyed a kind of *Narr-enfreiheit* among his friends: none of them dared call him to account lest he lose his temper and cut them out of his life.

Toward the end of his life he showed up in my office to borrow money, and spoke darkly about conspiracies being hatched against him. The news of his death came as a great shock. I could not help feeling that, although he had many friends whose help he had exploited and sometimes spurned, something could have been done to save him from himself. But what could have been done I do not know.

There can be little doubt that Delmore Schwartz was afflicted with insanity. It was latent, and no one who knew him as a student and youthful writer could have suspected its eruption. Nor can anyone reasonably claim that he was driven to insanity by a hostile or indifferent society. Few persons of his age were ever given more opportunities to follow their calling, or enjoyed more kindnesses, or received more praise and encouragement—not only from friends and colleagues but from established figures in the world of letters, of whom some were known for their critical acerbity and others, one might have suspected, were touched with envy. At twenty-four, the world was Delmore Schwartz's oyster. Yet he lived a largely miserable life and died a miserable death—and made others deeply miserable as he wound his way to the end.

What makes Delmore Schwartz's affliction

more mystifying is that even after his violent paranoia had landed him in Bellevue's psychiatric ward, he had periods of great lucidity during which it was possible to hope that his obsessions had lifted, especially those that centered around his martyred second wife—whom this boastful and indiscriminate philanderer had falsely taxed with infidelity.

In the fall of 1960 he gave me, after one of his periodic visits to my office, a copy of a brochure consisting of three lectures given in 1958 at the Library of Congress under the auspices of the Gertrude Clarke Whittall Poetry and Literature Fund and entitled *American Poetry at Mid-Century*. It was inscribed, "To Sidney—Master of those who love reason and study irrationality, from Delmore, October 1960." One of the three lectures was Delmore's "The Present State of Poetry." (The other two were by John Crowe Ransom and John Hall Wheelock.) His essay was an eminently reasonable, informative, and witty analysis of the new estate that poetry had won in American life—its positive and negative features. It justified his implied claim in the inscription: to be one who loved reason, at least in theory, and studied irrationality. In part it is a scathing analysis of the political idiocy of the frothy San Francisco Howlers—a circle of new poets who were pretending to lead an insurrection against a nonexistent threat of oppression. They were even attempting to link the residual philistinism of American cultural and literary life with the unmitigated Soviet political and cultural terror in Europe. One of the Howlers had asserted, "Poets are coming to San Francisco for the same reasons that Hungarians have been going to Austria recently" (in the aftermath of the ruthless suppression of the Hungarian revolt of 1956). In a sardonic reply to those who held this and similar views, Delmore Schwartz observed that apparently they did not "recognize the difference between the Red Army and the *Kenyon Review* critics, between Nikita Khrushchev and John Crowe Ransom or between the political commissars of a police state and the tyrants who write advertising copy on Madison Avenue."

With exemplary common sense, he rebukes those who were drawing equations between America's occasional failure to live up to its ideals of freedom and the systematic destruction of civil and cultural freedom in total-



itarian states. As his other activities and judgments show, Delmore Schwartz was certainly not advocating a defense of the American social and political status quo. He was merely calling into question, at a time "when the future of civilization is no longer assured," the wisdom of making criticisms of the undeniable shortcomings of American life the "primary preoccupation" of its intellectuals. He recognized a priority in the order of evils and threats to the life of freedom. "To criticize the actuality upon which all hope depends becomes a criticism of hope itself."

It should be pointed out that not all his political judgments were marked by this refreshing common sense. During the grim years when it appeared that Hitler and the Japanese warlords might be triumphant, he refused to endorse the policy of critical support of the war against fascism. He did not go as far as Paul Goodman and other irresponsibles who declared that American workers had more to fear from Roosevelt than from a triumphant Hitler. His opposition to the war, discreetly expressed, seemed to stem from a fear that reports of great battles and other events would distract the public's attention from his forthcoming books of poetry. His vanity, rather than any reasoned view of history and society, came into play in many of his observations.

In truth he was even less a political thinker than a philosopher. No matter how bizarre his judgment—and, unfortunately, his behavior—it was almost always extenuated by friends and admirers on the ground that he was a poet, even by those who were up in arms at the political judgments and activities of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. Whether by accident or because he was somewhat inhibited in consequence of the teacher-student relationship of the past, on the few occasions when I met him socially he was quite restrained and not as voluble as others have reported. But I recall being told by the editors of the *Partisan Review* several times, as something especially noteworthy in their poetry editor, that "once he got lit up" he would talk excitedly and knowledgeably about politics.

Atlas's book makes clear that even if psychologically Delmore Schwartz had been more normal and even tempered, he would have had a hard time coping with the sudden-



## The Theatrical Photographs of Napoleon Sarony

by Ben L. Bassham

Two streams of Gilded Age popular culture—the thrill of the stage and the rise of commercial photography—came together in Napoleon Sarony. From Sarah Bernhardt (above) to Sandow, the stars trooped to his camera, leaving us a visual record of a great age in American theatre. Bassham presents not only a generous sampling of the portraits but an incisive analysis of the man, his art, and his times. 11 illustrations, 44 plates, paperbound, \$8.50

The Kent State University Press  
Kent, Ohio 44242

ness and intensity of his early success. It went to his head, and he was terrified lest he could not live up to expectations in his subsequent work. This fear of failure had a paralyzing effect on him. He had given too many promises about himself that had been taken at face value. He had drawn all the material for his poems from his own life, but it was a life that was mostly imagined and reconstructed from vague memories. To some extent his strange behavior and his involvements with others were attempts to find fresh experiences that he could poetically exploit.

The speculation is idle, but I cannot help wondering whether, if Delmore Schwartz had not been overpraised, if he had been firmly criticized with no obvious evidence of unfairness, he might not have developed differently and led a more disciplined, less wayward life. He peopled his world with imaginary enemies in order not to blame himself. Perhaps if his early published work had met with a more balanced critical reception, his efforts to modify or refute the negative judgments might have led to a more productive and less unhappy life as a poet and a human being.

## Last Pagan in Purple

JULIAN THE APOSTATE. By G. W. Bowersock.  
Harvard University Press. \$12.50.

Reviewed by EDWARD N. LUTTWAK

Julian ruled as sole emperor for not much more than one year and a half. His attempt to disestablish Christianity had failed, and when he died of a war wound he left nothing behind him except for an unsuccessful campaign against the Persians. And yet this emperor of brief reign and nugatory achievement has attracted very great attention from his own day to ours. Not only have much history and much polemic been written about him, but also novels, good and bad, including a recent best-seller; and the modern Greek

poet Kafavy thought him a sufficiently transcendental figure to make him the subject of seven poems of quite remarkable quality.

There seem to be two reasons for all this interest: first, Julian's record can be easily misinterpreted as that of a liberal hero (he decreed "freedom of religion" and tried to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem); and, second—a much better reason—we know more about Julian's personal life and outlook than we know about any other figure of Roman antiquity with the exception of Cicero. His own writings survive in great part, and these are of a personal rather than official character and are therefore revealing of the man. The narrative sources on Julian are relatively abundant, and there are also some epigraphy, valuable numismatic data, and important legal evidence preserved in the Theodosian Code. The sources for the fourth century are otherwise so poor that Julian emerges alone as a well-lit figure in a great darkness. Hence the ample modern literature, including several full-length monographs.

Yet G. W. Bowersock's book is not redundant; on the contrary, it is an important work. Bowersock makes full use of some fragmentary evidence that others have neglected, and he reinterprets usefully. The major contemporary sources, aside from Julian's own letters and other writings, are those of Libanius, a pagan Sophist from Antioch and a major figure of his period, and those of Gregory, Julian's schoolmate in Athens and later bishop of Nazianzus in Cappadocia. Libanius pro and Gregory contra would have been well balanced had the history written by Eunapius of Sardis survived; since his *Lives of the Sophists* is with us, we have some idea of how precious a witness has been lost.

But of course another of Julian's contemporaries was Ammianus Marcellinus. Not only was he the most important Latin historian of the entire period but he also served as an officer in Julian's armies and was on the scene of the ill-fated Persian campaign. Bowersock's most important contribution is his reinterpretation of Ammianus Marcellinus as a source of information about Julian's life. Ammianus wrote in the annalistic tradition and therefore gives us a chronological account—precisely what is missing in the other contemporary sources. As a result, modern historians of Julian have always tried to integrate ma-

• EDWARD N. LUTTWAK is adjunct professor in the School of Advanced International Studies at the Johns Hopkins University and senior fellow of the Georgetown Center of Strategic Studies. He is the author of *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire: From the First Century A.D. to the Third*.